

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

The Last Whale Danielle Clode

Lone-handed, George Davidson, a 70-years-old master whaler attacked and killed a humpback whale at Twofold Bay. The veteran whaler worked from a small dinghy and used only a lance...

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A dark shape lolls out in the bay. A seal perhaps, catching the last warmth of the winter sun – flippers skyward, head down, looking like an old box washed out to sea.

From his seat in the outhouse up the ridge, the old man can see right across Twofold Bay. On a clear day he can see the white caps break over Mewstone Rock. Random patches of foam cling to the surface for a breath or two before subsiding into blue. Even now he can spot the patches that fracture the surface in close succession, those that linger longer than they should, that surge in troughs rather than peaks, suggesting a source from beneath rather than above. Fish, dolphins, whales, seals, sharks; their signatures written on the water for those who can read them.

The shape rolls into view again. Not a seal: too dark, too large. He watches as it drifts closer, appearing and disappearing in the troughs of the swell.

His trousers slump into ancient boots and he leans forward onto dry, wrinkled knees to look out of the open door of the outhouse. Old man's knees. Parchment skin stretched across bone and sinew, all its elasticity sucked dry by years at sea. Hairless shins are worn bare by the daily friction of gumboots. Blotched brown hands rest on pale thin thighs. Winter air fans the smell of seaweed around his bare behind, mingling with the dark warmth from the drop. He rips a square of newspaper off the hook beside him.

A wave breaks, black rolls over white. A distinctive triangle slaps limply against the water. It is Tom. The waves cuff the old killer whale's fin back and forth as if trying to reanimate his lifeless body. His fin smacks the water like a comic re-enactment of the many times he had flop-tailed in the bay, waking the whalers with a mighty crash of his tail, calling them to action. *Rush-oooo*, they'd all cry, leaping clumsily from their beds, falling over each other into the boats. C'mon, Tom would call with another crash of his tail, get a move on.

He watches a fishing boat trail its wake across the bay, heading back to port. Sometimes he'll join the fishermen at the hotel, listening to their stories, their bragging and laughter. 'Old Fearless' they call him, as he sits with his lemon squash. The fishermen never brave the southern gales in their over-powered trawlers. Only whalers go out in winter, rowing their open gigs, six men to a boat, hunting humpbacks, right whales and ninety-foot blues.

But that was long ago. There are no more whales now. No more whalers. Only Old Fearless, sitting on the ridge, still scanning for the tell-tale slice of white, the hiss and fan of a blow-hole to mark the start of the season.

The body in the bay rolls again, fin slapping the water. C'mon, calls Tom.

The old whaler heads back down the path to the house. His knee doesn't bend anymore. A whale broke it; a whale could cure it, if there was a whale to be had. But

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there is no more whale oil to soak aching limbs, no more hot, greasy carcasses to slide into. Straight leg first down the hill, he pivots over the steps. Bending is over-rated.

The path leads down to the cottage behind the ridge, overlooking the inlet which meters its tea-stained waters across a ripple of sandbanks into the bay. A dark snake of water marks the narrow channel where the whale-boats once towed their prizes into the sheltered waters and dragged them up onto the beach. The bones of the giants blanch on the beach, where their carcasses were flensed and boiled, rendered and reduced down to a few barrels of precious oil. He can still smell the acrid stench even after all these years.

Past the tryworks, derelict and unused. The huts where the crews lived crumble back into the earth. Once there had been a village here, filled with men, wives and children. They've all gone – upped and left when the whales stopped coming.

The whale-boat lies on its side, exposed ribs gaping at the elements, green paint flaking onto white sand. Too big for one man, it will lie here until it rots away like all the other relics. Gradually doing less, using less, making do with less, until finally there is nothing left but a pile of old bones.

He upends the dinghy, retrieving the oars from underneath and dragging it down to the water. The sturdy little boat bobs under his weight, sliding into the smooth rhythm of the oars as they pass from the sheltered inlet, over the sandbar, onto the choppy waters of the bay.

Waves slap steadily against the hull as the boat pushes through them. He watches the water change from pale green over shallow sand, past dark smudges of rock, into deep weedy blue. Here, it was exactly here – unmarked and unforgotten – that his son's body was found thirteen years ago. He holds his breath as he passes, oars dripping, and lets himself drift for a moment.

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It had been a fine day. They'd crossed that bar a thousand times. But the tide was on the turn, making the crossing more treacherous than usual. The wind had picked up a chop and the current must have caught the dinghy as it crossed the bar, just enough to tip in a breaking wave. The wind blew the cries of the children across the water, the shouting of men as they rushed to the shore, dragging bodies from the surf. All but one – his dark head bobbed in the waves, trying to right the boat, holding a child afloat. And then he was gone.

It was Tom who found the body the next day. He had seen Tom circling insistently, guiding the boats back, nudging at pale limbs in dark weeds. He followed the black bulk of the killer whale, diving in to untangle his son. He floated in-between, in a green world where his boy stared back at him. He wanted to drift with him out to sea, unbreathing, unseeing. He didn't want to surface. He didn't want to suck in that painful grieving breath. It was Tom who forced them both up, pushing them back to the surface, pushing him back to the air.

Tom had always been there to save him. Tom had dragged him up by the seat of his pants when he'd gone over tangled in a line. Tom stood between the men and the sharks whenever a boat capsized. It wasn't anything special. They were family, that's all. When a whaler dies, the blackfellas said, his spirit goes into a killer whale. But no young killer whale ever came to replace his son.

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Less than a breath and the moment passes. The oars resume their steady rhythm, the water slapping once more against the hull.

The swell has brought Tom's body closer to him. He digs his oar in deep, spinning the dinghy to come alongside. He strokes the black skin, still gleaming smooth and glossy. Tom's mouth hangs ajar, the ivory spikes that once slashed ninety-foot monsters worn to yellowed stubs of decay in raw gums.

Tom was the only one who stayed. Who knows where the others went: Stranger, Hooky, Humpy and the rest of the pod? Maybe the pickings were better up the coast. They'd worked together for over fifty years, and with his father and grandfather before that. But then the killers left. Only Tom came back, every year a bit older and a bit slower. Now he's come home to die.

The old man tosses a rope around the great tail, lashing it to the stern cleat. He digs his oars in short and sharp, feeling them bite against the heavy weight. Slowly he picks up speed, eddies slipping around the streamlined body behind him, even in death aligning itself to the flow and sliding effortlessly through the water.

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Next morning, he sits on his customary seat, looking out over the bay. Voices drift across the calm water as if they were just downhill instead of five miles away. Right whale weather. Right whales were the best whales, slow, placid and easy to kill. Not like finbacks, angry things that thrashed and fought like the very devil. Right whales, fin whales, blues and humpbacks – he'd hunted them all.

He thinks of Tom, the times he mucked about and teased the whalers, towing them out to sea, splashing them in their boats. The times he annoyed them, leaving them wet and shouting. He thinks of the whales Tom has caught him, the whales Tom has lost him. No more whales for Tom.

He wonders what to do with the body. He could drag it out to sea, weigh it down, watch it sink into the depths. It's how he'd like to go when his own time comes. No fuss, no funeral, no speeches. His daughter doesn't agree. Funerals are for the living, Dad, not the dead, she says. She's right. He won't care when he's dead, anymore than Old Tom. There is no one left to mourn old Tom, no one to remember him.

He picks a bit of bacon from between the gap in his teeth. There had been nothing in Tom's stomach when he'd slid the flensing knife through his flesh.

A plume of spray catches his eye, far out into the bay. His eyes lock onto the shifting water, tracking an invisible path left and right. There it is again; the round wide plume of a humpback. A long white flipper extends out of the water. He stands tense, watching. Who could crew? His mind flicks over the fishermen, his children off in the city. There's no-one left. Just Old Fearless.

He races down the hill, three steps at a time.

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His breath comes short and sharp as the little dinghy surges across the bay towards the whale. He doesn't want to lose it. The miles trickle past beneath the boat. Good thing it's calm. A mile off and he finally eases the pace.

Easy does it, easy now, he murmurs. He lets the dinghy drift in closer, easing the oars back, barely rippling the surface. As he waits, he coils the rope in the tub amidships, attaches the harpoon and checks the lance.

The sun is high overhead now; even in winter it warms him through his shirt.

If only he had rowers and a harpooner, with himself as headsman. Should have brought the boat-gun or a whale bomb, but the force would probably capsize the dinghy. Other whalers worked with five or six boats. He had only ever had two. Two boats and the killers. He wishes Tom was here, and the other killers, heading the whale off, keeping its head up, clamping onto its flippers and lips. But today there is only one old man in a dinghy.

The whale surfaces to starboard, heading east out of the bay. Quickly he rows ahead, judging the time the whale will stay underwater, where it will resurface. Eight minutes, six minutes, four, two. The oars racket back in the rowlocks. He twists around, feet braced apart to keep the dinghy stable, hefting the barbed harpoon in his right hand over his shoulder and balancing the long smooth shaft with his left. One minute. Pale eyes focus on the point where the whale will return, his pupils shrink against the glare. He searches beneath the oily reflections, motionless as a heron, sifting through the light and shade for darkness beneath.

A shadow expands below the surface. The whale breaches, expelling steamy breaths as if through pursed lips. The pungent smell of decomposing flotsam hangs in the air between them. He hurls the harpoon into the humpback's neck, just behind the blowhole. Rope rattles from the tub, arcing its trajectory across the sky, the metal barb burying itself deep into the whale's flesh.

With a groan, the whale rolls away, sinking deep underwater. Its tail erupts into the air, smashing down inches from the dinghy. He drops to a squat, grabbing the sides. The Hand of God, they call the whale's tail, smashing boats from on high. But God does not want him yet.

He can hear the whale's cry through the water, through the boat, echoing first on one side, then up and under the other. A long wailing sigh that you feel in your bones. There is nothing so sad in all the world as the cry of a dying humpback. He watches the flicking rope uncoil in front of him, careful to avoid any loops as it snakes into the water. He has a hundred fathoms of rope. The whale will take all that and more if he lets it.

He sits up and begins to row again, chasing the trailing rope. The whale is heading out of the bay. It has dived, but not too deep. It will have to come up for air soon.

Up ahead the whale surfaces, firing quick short breaths into the air, red and steamy with blood. Chimney on fire – it's fatally wounded. Even so it could take days to die, slashed and harried by sharks to the end. He's not close enough to strike the final blow though – the headsman's shot – the lance that will put it out of its misery. He rows on with renewed strength, hoping to outpace it, hoping its wound will slow it down. The sun is falling; he'll lose her in the dark.

Adrenalin drives him faster than he expects, or perhaps the whale has slowed. It rises beneath the boat. He senses it coming and throws himself to starboard, hoping to tip the dinghy enough to one side to avoid capsize. The water lifts the boat above the rising mass. As the whale breaches, he slides downhill off its back, the stern gouging into the water before bouncing back to the surface. An oar jars free from its rowlock, sliding away from the boat. Cursing, he checks the lance is still in the bow, the blubber spade and spare harpoons still where he tucked them under the thwarts.

Waves surge out from the whale's descent, tipping and pitching the boat and pushing the oar further away. Waiting until the water settles, he paddles his remaining

oar to retrieve its pair. He'll have to row fast now to catch up.

His breath shortens as he pushes through the wheeze at the bottom of his lungs. Water sloshes heavily in the bilge. The ache in his leg has returned. What was it his daughter called him? Old fool? A man would have to be a fool to be a whaler. It is what he is – a whale killer, like the killer whales. He'd seen Old Tom out chasing a grampus a few days before his death. Whale killer to the last. And now he was the last of the Twofold Bay whale killers. Old Fearless, out hunting one last whale, on his own.

He sees the rope drifting to the stern and pulls it in, flaking it into the tub. The whale must be milling below. He picks up the lance, a long straight blade. The whale barely makes a ripple as it rises to the surface exhausted, its breath erratic now. He scans from blowhole to fin – a good forty foot. His eye fixes on the fatal point between its ribs, three feet from the knucklebone of the flipper. Here lies the heart, a beating mass too large for one man to lift, arteries so big a dog could crawl inside. He knows just how much blood pumps through those veins. It has stained the water black for a mile behind them.

With one swift stab, the lance plunges in. The whale shudders, a great spasm that breaks the surrounding water into quivering tessellations. He feels it through his arms, through the water and the boat. It envelops him, filling him with a shadowy presence, before dispersing like a handful of sand in the water.

All is still. The silence seems much bigger than it should. Like something has vanished so suddenly you can't even remember what it was.

He hastily secures the whale before it sinks. It is too big to tow home. He'll have to ask Logan to come out in the launch and bring it in later. He watches as the body drifts down, ropes taking up the slack out of the darkness, the glass buoys bobbing as they take the weight. So little air to hold such a heavy load.

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The row home takes forever. His hands blister between callouses. How quickly they get soft. A dark stain soaks his trousers. He rolls them up revealing mottled bruising and grazed skin. Thin skin, thin blood. He knots a rag around his leg and keeps rowing. Steady does it, keep the rhythm and your body forgets the time and the tiredness.

Without thought, he crosses the bay – across the bar, around the point and up to the beach. The route he's taken every day of his life. Darkness is nothing, absence of form as familiar as its presence. He drags the boat up next to Tom's body. Sand gives way beneath his feet. Time, tiredness sweep over him. The ages all rush back. He falls back onto the sand, lying full stretch beside the whale. He feels his heart fluttering in his chest, small enough to hold in one hand. How much blood pumps through these veins?

The sand crushes warm beneath him, holding memories of past sunlight. He rests one hand on the killer whale, stroking the smoothness of its dark dead skin. The last whale. No more. Their days of whale-killing are done now. In the morning he'll strip back Old Tom, give his bones to a museum. Lest they forget. He rests his hand on the killer whale's side and waits for dawn.